

Young people in abusive dating relationships are happier when relationship ends than they expected, study finds

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(Medical Xpress)—Young adults in abusive and controlling dating relationships were happier when their relationships were over than they expected to be, according to a Purdue University study.

"It wasn't a surprise that these people were better off than they had expected when their relationship ended, but what was interesting was that there was a disconnect between how they actually felt and how they had anticipated feeling months earlier," said Ximena Arriaga (pronounced He-MEN-ah Ah-ree-AH-ga), an associate professor of [psychological sciences](#) who studies dating relationships. "The more aggression they experienced from their partner, the bigger the gap between what they had expected and what actually happened. So, not only are people misjudging their future happiness post-relationship, but they also are misreading how poorly they feel in the moment while in their relationship.

"[Fear](#) of a relationship ending keeps people in relationships. People are afraid they will be worse off if it ends. This study looked at people who are dating, which means there is no formal or financial bond, but yet these individuals were still committed to relationships that were hurtful to them."

In this study, 171 young people, average age 19, were surveyed every two weeks for about three months. More than 80 percent of the

participants were women, and they all were in an abusive dating relationship. Participants reported at least one act of verbal, psychological or [physical aggression](#) by their partner. Examples of abuse included being shoved or controlled, sworn at or humiliated.

These [participants](#) reported their current happiness and how happy they expected to feel if the relationship ended. At the end of the study, 46 people were no longer in a relationship, and on average their reports of [happiness](#) exceeded what they had predicted months earlier while in the relationship. The findings are published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

Aggression in dating relationships has been studied before, but Arriaga wanted to understand what influences people to stay in these unhealthy relationships, based on how accurately they predicted their feelings. Outside of relationship studies, research shows that people tend to overestimate how affected they will be by a major event, whether it is something terrible, such as not getting a promotion, or positive, such as winning the lottery. Arriaga examined this overestimating bias to dating.

Arriaga says that these forms of aggression, such as put downs, negative criticism and possessiveness, are common with young couples who are dating, and many [young people](#) may not realize the behavior is a problem.

"But it will be a long-term problem for some people, and especially so if these problems are carried into a marriage," Arriaga says. "The take-home message is that if you have any sense the relationship is not going well, attend to those feelings, especially before marrying when things get very complicated. When there is a lot of aggression, especially controlling behavior, the problem often gets worse. Moreover, aggression can be damaging even when it's not that physical; many people don't believe that."

Arriaga also is looking at what psychological mechanisms cause a person to preserve a negative relationship at the expense of their well-being, and at what point does the victim shift toward wanting to end an aggressive dating relationship. For example, in this study, the majority of people who were still in their dating [relationship](#) reported instances of aggression.

More information: Individual Well-Being and Relationship Maintenance at Odds: The Unexpected Perils of Maintaining a Relationship With an Aggressive Partner, Ximena B. Arriaga, Nicole M. Capezza, Wind Goodfriend, Elizabeth S. Rayl and Kaleigh J. Sands, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2013.

ABSTRACT

Partner aggression negatively affects well-being in ways that the people experiencing aggression may not expect. Individuals ($n = 171$) who reported aggression by their current partner completed a longitudinal study. At the start of the study, participants rated their current happiness and how happy they expected to feel if their relationship were to end. The data revealed a partner aggression-unhappiness link and evidence of misforecasting future happiness: Committed individuals overestimated their unhappiness after a breakup because they expected worse things from a breakup than actually materialized, and people who experienced higher partner aggression overestimated their unhappiness because they became more happy without the partner than they had expected. Forecasting unhappiness after a breakup predicted staying in an aggressive relationship. In aggressive relationships, bias occurs not only in forecasting future happiness, but also in misreading how badly one feels now.

Provided by Purdue University

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